



Devan Ravine/Associated Press  
Lt. Gen. Maxwell C. Bailey, U.S. Air Force special operations commander, pins a Purple Heart on Staff Sgt. Michael during a ceremony on Thursday at Hurlburt Field.

# Injured Hurlburt airman is awarded Purple Heart

Associated Press

**HURLBURT FIELD** — The first Air Force member injured in action against the Taliban in Afghanistan received a Purple Heart during an outdoor ceremony Thursday.

The soldier, a combat controller named Michael whose last name was not disclosed for security reasons, received the medal from Lt. Gen. Maxwell Bailey, commander of the Air Force Special Operations Command, in front of about 300 colleagues, relatives and friends at the Florida Panhandle base.

Michael, a combat controller from Oxford, Conn., suffered ruptured eardrums and a scratched cornea when a U.S. bomb hit near American troops Nov. 26 during an uprising by Taliban prisoners at a fortress outside of Mazar-e-

Sharif. The bomb also injured four Army special forces soldiers.

"This is a bittersweet award, and I'm honored to be included among the ranks of those who have earned this award," said the airman, wearing the combat controllers' distinctive red beret.

The ceremony was held in front of a monument honoring fallen "Air Commandos" amid a permanent display of camouflage-painted aircraft that special operators have flown over the years.

It marked the first time the highly secretive Air Force Special Operations Command has publicly acknowledged having troops and aircraft in Afghanistan.

Maxwell said the command has operated to the full range of its capabilities. That includes AC-130 Spectre gunships and aircraft equipped with sophisticated elec-

tronic gear to help avoid detection while flying troops, weapons and supplies inside hostile territory.

Michael is assigned to the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron at Hurlburt, which is near Fort Walton Beach. He enlisted more than eight years ago as a medical technician and later trained as a combat controller.

"The true heroes are the American people who have continued on with their lives following the tragic events of Sept. 11, especially the firefighters, police officers and the family members of every soldier, sailor, airman and Marine supporting Operation Enduring Freedom," Michael said.

"I have been asked if I would go back tomorrow, and the answer is 'Without hesitation.'"

Michael was in the field for a month before he was injured.